

Title: Interview with Donna Laird

Date: April 25, 2025.

Location: Somerset County Commissioners office (inside of the Somerset County Government building), 11916 Somerset Ave.

Interviewer(s): John Golladay and Eva Arnold

Interviewee: Donna Laird

Introduction: Donna Laird talks about her experience growing up and working in Crisfield for nearly all her life, and how she has seen over the years Crisfield slowly becoming nothing like was in her childhood memories. She talks about the lack of businesses, what it's like to own chicken houses in a flood zone, and how she doesn't really see a future for Crisfield, even though she wants the town to bounce back.

[Transcription begins]

John Galladay (Galladay): All right, so we're here on the 4th of April, 2025, with Ms. Donna Laird here at her office in Princess Anne. And the interviewers are John Galladay and Eva Arnold. Can I get your full name, please?

Donna Laird (Laird): Donna Gene Laird.

Galladay: Okay, thank you very much. Alright, so just- just starting off, how long have you lived in the Crisfield area?

Laird: Since I was born, 65 years.

Eva Arnold (Arnold): So, you were born there, what was it like when you were growing up younger or around the time that you were born, and how do you think it's changed since then?

Laird: Pertaining to flooding? [Overlapping voices of Galladay and Arnold] It was typical hometown America. You didn't have to lock your doors. You felt safe. Neighbors watched other neighbors' kids. You know, we played outside. We rode our bicycles, you know. We all had to be home when the streetlights came on. And there were stores downtown on Main Street. You could buy shoes, it was a shoe store. There was a jewelry store. There was a couple department stores. That's not there anymore. And you don't feel safe in Crisfield. And you do lock your doors, yeah.

Galladay: Where'd you like to ride- ride your bikes when you- when you did that?

Laird: We- we rode around the circle, which is the dual highway that goes nowhere, right to the end of Crisfield. And we rode our bicycles around there. We'd ride to other friends' house, houses, yeah.

Arnold: As far as you knew, was that experience something that was unique to Crisfield, or do you think it had more to do with the time?

Laird: A little bit of both, cause not everybody had the circle to ride, you know, the highway. And then, of course, when we advanced to driving cars, you know, everybody, when you left the house, you rode the circle. It's three miles all the way around, and you just, that's what you did. I don't think the kids do that now as. You'll go on the highway at 9 o'clock on a Friday night and there's nobody on the highway anymore. We call the highway the circle. So yeah, that was pertaining to Crisfield, but back in the 60s and 70s, life was completely different. And we're always like 10 years behind the time. So whatever is popular in the cities, we'll get it 10 years later and we'll start doing it.

Arnold: What keeps you in Crisfield?

Laird: Well, like I said, I was born there, and I worked at the local hospital at the time. And then when that kind of shut down, I already got married and had kids and remarried and had kids, and remarried again. So, and my house is there, and my parent was- parents were still there. And then we also have poultry farm. So that's what we do. So if we left we have to, our- our work is there.

Arnold: So you think the two biggest factors would be work and family?

Laird: Oh yeah.

Galladay: And- and what did you do there when you worked at the local hospital?

Laird: Respiratory Therapist. [pauses]

Galladay: What are- what are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield, whether it be your childhood or more current times? [pauses]

Laird: I always cherished the main street. I really did like that. I mean, you'd- you'd take five dollars and you could walk downtown and, you know, before the days of Walmart, and you go get a soda and snacks and everybody knew you. People were walking downtown. I mean, before my time, they said, "You know on Friday nights you couldn't get a parking spot in there." There used to be a movie theater you could go to, it was. Now, if you want to do anything, you've got to drive for at least 45 minutes to Salisbury or Pocomoke.

Arnold: Outside of that, how did you entertain yourself in Crisfield and did you ever attend any community events, whether it be meetings or we heard a lot about crab fests and seafood festivals and stuff like that.

Laird: Yeah. Well, back in them days, also churches were your main focus. I mean, you were in the NYF, you were in the choir, you had to go to church, whether you wanted to or not because your mother and father made you go to church. So, that was always something we did. And, of course, we liked it because we were always with friends and then, yeah, the Crab Derby was always a special time to go to, to see people mostly. The parade, when you were younger, that was always really nice to go to. And my grandmother always had a picnic for the family. We always went to her house to eat after the parade. [pauses]

Arnold: Have you noticed any changes in the land, weather, water, or flooding in Crisfield, and if you have, how have these changes affected daily life?

Laird: The streets flood terribly and it makes it very hard to travel. Schools are closed a lot because of the flooding. The one main street that the middle school is located is always flooded and they are always calling schools out, schools off because of that. It did flood when I was younger, but it wouldn't flood the- the roads would drain quicker. It- it doesn't drain, it's just so much flooding. And honestly, with the new laws, they won't let, you know, they're so strict on putting bulkheads up and yes, some is flooding and some is erosion, you know, and not everybody can afford to do the bulkheading and get the permits. And, you know, back in the day, they would just take bricks and rocks and put up the- and stone. Now you've got to go through all this permitting, and it cost a fortune. [pauses]

Galladay: Going back to your- to your grandmother real quick, you said you'd always have picnics there after the parade. What was she like? What did she do in Crisfield? Was she a resident?

Laird: She, my grandmother, she was a seamstress that worked at a factory. They used to have a sewing factory, no sewing factory anymore. And she worked there all her life. [pauses] And she was a typical grandmother. But you know, she always had an oven full of food, and you know and you went, and when I was a little kid, I would go there every Saturday night. We played cards with her lady friends, you know, played dominoes. We'd play all those games. But not on Sunday. You couldn't even use scissors on Sunday for paper dolls or anything like that because that was a no-no, back in the day. And back in the day, all the stores were closed on Sunday, no malls were open. I remember that when that became legal, you know, when the stores were open on Sundays, you did not go shopping on Sundays. You went to church. [pauses]

Galladay: So what kind of role did the- did the waterfront play in your, the upbringing of the- the lifestyle in Crisfield?

Laird: Well, the waterfront, well my father was an oyster buyer, so he ran bay, what do they call, buy boats. And actually, and that was his income. My mother didn't work. Uh, years ago, there's an island off Old Island. Everybody would go there on Sundays, take their boats and go there and swim. And we still do. It's not as crowded, but we still go. And my husband is a part-time waterman. He crabs on the canal.

Arnold: And he still is right now as well. Do you think, as far as business goes, that it's changed at all over time in terms of crabbing or oysters?

Laird: Oh yeah. It's harder for the men to make a living on the water, and that's mostly partially regulations from the state of Maryland. You know, part of its nature, but I think nature can recycle itself. But, you know, they put so many regulations on the crabbers and the fisheries... Control.

Galladay: So when- so when your father was oystering, how many oysters would he bring in at a time?

Laird: Well, he didn't oyster, he was an oyster buyer. So he would go to the docks and the boats would come in and he would buy the oysters, take them and truck them to wherever he sold them to.

Arnold: And would that be outside of Crisfield or businesses inside of Crisfield?

Laird: Oh, outside of Crisfield. Yeah, I don't know really what he did with the buy boat. I don't know, I was kind of young, I didn't pay attention. So, they did oysters too. I think they more or less took the oyster shells or seed and replanted them for the oyster beds for that.

Arnold: Are there any storms or flooding events that you remember vividly?

Laird: Well, I lived through Hurricane Sandy. That was probably the worst I've ever seen it. I mean I literally saw water waves coming up in my yard. The wind, it was really bad. My husband was out in it because he was trying to get to the chicken houses, the poultry farm, which is not exactly where we live, but close by. So we called someone that we knew that had one of these old army trucks, and couldn't he pick him up? And he said, "Well, I can get to this one little bridge," and we call it the Piss Bridge, cause all the kids ride around, we just go drinking, and guess what? So anyway, he said, "I can get to Piss Bridge and, and pick you up." So my husband just had to walk from our house down the dirt lane to Piss Bridge. And he said it was awful. And when he got to Piss Bridge, it's so low. I don't even know what the bridge is called, but it's a little county bridge. The tide was going through, he really got scared. And my husband is like a big old football player. It takes a lot for him to get scared. He said it's awful. And that's the worst he's ever seen it. and he couldn't get back home. He got to the chicken house, had a walk, he said when he got out of the truck, water came up to his chest. Had a walk through the lane to get to

the chicken houses. I don't, the tractor was there, I think, so he got on the tractor, I don't know how he got, but he went, we have two little farms, he got to the other farm where my son was living, his little house there, and he had to stay there. He couldn't get home that night.

Arnold: As far as infrastructure, like your home or the farm itself, how did the farm, the- the storm effect?

Laird: Well, the storm it, a couple of the chicken houses on one side, water got, the tide water got in- in it. I luckily, I can't remember, I'm thinking that, well, we had to just remove the wet manure. That's what I, it was a mess, and you don't want to be around wet manure, so we had, you know, get rid of that, dry it out. My house did not have any damage. The water did not get in my house, but my whole yard was surrounded by water. It looked like I- our house was sitting in the middle of the bed. So, that's about it. Luckily, yeah, our house did not get flooded out.

Arnold: I've heard a lot about certain areas being low-lying and others being higher. Would you say that your house is low-lying or on higher land?

Laird: I think my house is pretty much, I mean, not in the highest, but is on a higher part of the land, but around the sides of it is lower. And I- I live on the canal, so it, you know, yeah, it's.

Galladay: Do you do anything in particular to prepare for flooding events if you know they're coming?

Laird: Move my cars.

Arnold: Where do you usually put it?

Laird: Well, actually, I have a part of my driveway that it's usually high. So we kind of are okay where I live. But, a lot of people will move them to where Food Lion's located. I think our garage gets or shed or whatever gets flooded really bad and my husband will lift the refrigerators or freezers up as best he can on bricks and move everything off the ground or floor.

Galladay: Besides Sandy, are there any other big flooding events you have clear memories of?

Laird: Well, I remember all of them, but that was the worst. When I was a kid, I lived on Somerset Avenue. So, I was kid, flooding was too bad. My grandmother, however, lived on Myrtle Street, which is one of the worst roads that floods. So, yeah, I do remember that. There was some kind of bad storm, end of August, back when I was probably 12 or 13. And the reason I remember it, it was Crab Derby, and Crab Derby was canceled, the parade was canceled. And we, we were in a dance club, and we had decorated the float. So we couldn't be in the parade. So what we did, we all just hung out, went wading through town for something to do, because we all wanted to get to the Crab Derby but we couldn't. Other than that, after Hurricane Sandy, I don't know if you know about long-term recovery. They came to town, the Mennonites, Lutheran, and

actually I got a job there. McCready Hospital had closed down the med-surg unit, and I worked for them at long-term recovery for two years as a case worker. So I dealt with so many people who did have a lot of flooding in their homes, and we helped build 20-some homes with the-with- through long-term recovery. And also, the county had built 20-some homes, but it's harder to get money through the county than it was with long- term recovery. We didn't have to follow the government rules.

Arnold: As far as, going back to your grandmother again, I know you mentioned the location being different than your house as far as the effects of flooding. How do you think flooding affects the elderly community differently than it does other- other communities?

Laird: Okay. Even though I- I live on the water, on the canal, I mean the little piece of ground we are on is a little bit higher. It doesn't flood as bad, but in the cities, it's flooding and it's flooding worse, but I believe, in my opinion, it's because the ditches are not maintained. They have not been checked on. They have been forgotten. I mean, you've got ditches in between neighbors' houses, they've been filled in, nobody goes and checks it. Also, floodgates. The city has not maintained the floodgates for years. You can see that on Hall Highway, the main entrance to the hospital. It's almost always water on the road. It's not a lot, but you can always see it in a high tide because the- the floodgates aren't working. They're destroyed, they need to fix them. Like I said, it's always flooded, you know, for 65 years. But it would flood once the tide went out. It would drain, the ditches would drain the water, and life went on. But now there's no way the water can get out.

Arnold: How would you say businesses are doing in Crisfield? I know you talked a little bit about Main Street being less of an attraction.

Laird: Very few. Very few, but Main Street, they tried, you know, but you can go downtown and see the stores are all old and it's you got, you got a couple drug stores that are hanging on, and that's another story. And then the restaurants are not here anymore. We used to have great restaurants, there's, you know. Of course, that's not all because of flooding, now it's the economy.

Arnold: The ones that are successful and still there, what do you think separates them from the ones that closed? [pauses]

Laird: There isn't no restaurants. Well, we have one that keeps opening and closing, you know. There, the one nice restaurant they had, that's gone. I think it just, the cost of everything, plus it was low and it- it flooded. There's still one at the beginning when you come in town. Yeah, that's- that's about the only restaurant that's left in Crisfield. So, I don't know, we all travel to Salisbury if you want to go out to dinner.

Arnold: Do you have any opinions on how the city, county, or state has handled flooding issues in particular in Crisfield?

Laird: Do I have any opinions? I think I just said, I mean, nothing against the county government, but I do not think Crisfield has had the money... to, I think it was just overlooked over time. Years ago, you know, people knew the importance of ditching and cleaning ditches and I think it's just been overlooked for years and years and years and been neglected whether it was because of lack of money or just ignorance. I don't know. But, floodgates, they have to be maintained, they have to. You have to replace them. You have to check on them, you have, whether they have the help to do it, or do they want to pay the people to do it, I don't know. It just hasn't been done.

Galladay: Are you aware of any current projects that are meant to help reduce flooding or?

Laird: Yeah. I don't really agree with it. I haven't drank the Kool-Aid with it yet. And I will tell you why, even though I'm not, I don't want, I don't want to throw the City of Crisfield in it. Or not this, and it's not any person, but what I'm understanding with this new project about building like the roads all up and kind of making a semi-wall to keep the tide from coming in with FEMA. That sounds really great in a perfect world. But, when we get a strong rain and all that water comes down inside this bowl, where's the water gonna go? Okay, yeah, they're saying they're gonna have these pumps or, you know, I don't, the pumps. They're gonna pump the water out and it's gonna work great. Okay, in a perfect world. But what happens when the pumps are not maintained? The pumps aren't working that day? FEMA's gone, the money's gone. Crisfield can't maintain the pumps to keep them working, what's going to happen? I think you're going to have even more flooding. The water is going to be trapped there. I mean, is that going to happen tomorrow? No, but I know Crisfield, they got a sewer pump and I don't even know if I'm saying that gets stopped up. Because why? Because of housing projects throws waste down it. So the- so the- guess what? They gotta get money to fix the pump. That waits for a while. You know what I mean? It's the windmill. That was gonna, yeah, if it were in a perfect world, that would work great, save them money. But it breaks down. Then the company that sold it to them goes out of business, or they go bankrupt. And so then they have to find someone else to come and maintain it. And that costs more money. So there you got a broken windmill. I don't think Crisfield has the capacity to keep the big infrastructure like that. I think if they focused on something they could do, like the ditching, you know, yes, I think, yeah, FEMA can get on that money, building on that, but who's going to maintain it year after year after years after year, and how much it's going to cost year after year after year after year, and who's going to pay for it?

Arnold: Do you think younger generations are less likely to stay in Crisfield?

Laird: I would tell them to leave in a New York minute. I'd tell my kids, you know, "get a job." I said, "I don't care what you do when you grow up, but you're going to college. And you're gonna, after four years of college, you get your college degree, you do what you want." But at

least I know you can go somewhere and work with a college degree. There's no jobs in Crisfield. My son is a teacher. He could have got a job. And he did, but he got married and he's moved away. Not very far, to Snow Hill. Will he come back? First, I would tell you no, but I think now they're thinking if they, we're not getting any younger. If he wants to work the chicken farm, he's gotta be closer, I don't know. My other son, no, he is gone. He's crossed the bay, he isn't coming back. My other son is not in Crisfield, but he's moved a little bit farther north so.

Galladay: How many kids do you have?

Laird: Four.

Galladay: And what was it- what was it like raising them in the Crisfield area?

Laird: It- it was, it's still different than what it was, you know. When I had four boys, and they were boys, I wasn't lucky. I wasn't one of them lucky parents. They had the perfect kids, you know what I mean? They had friends, they would ride their four wheelers. They'd be gone all day, God knows what they did. But, you know, they all wanted their license at 16. That was just their goal in life. Actually, two became a teacher. But I have two that are disabled. So one has retired from teaching. And the other one was too disabled. He did not go to college he was. Yeah, he couldn't manage it. But, it was fun. I think they had a good childhood. It was fun in Crisfield.

Arnold: Do you see yourself sticking around in Crisfield?

Laird: I'm- I'm not going nowhere. And then where do you go? There's flooding anywhere now. I mean, it was flooding not too long ago in the mountains, and who would have thought it would ever flood like that there so? Do you want to go to Florida? You got hurricanes, so you're gonna have bad weather or something to deal with I think everywhere.

Arnold: So you think your connection to Crisfield, whether it be history or the farms and the work that you have there, makes it worth it? Like you think the- your connection to Crisfield through your family or your work, whatever it may be, your family history makes like things like the flooding or the businesses worth it. Those [inaudible] of businesses, that is.

Laird: Well, now I would move, but I'm too old now, you know. It's like, I'm- I'm 65 years old, where am I gonna go? I got a nice little job, you know, I like, I do like the people, but, and I'm here cause of our chicken houses.

Galladay: What is it about the people that you like?

Laird: What is it that I like? I don't know. They're friendly. The one thing I will tell you is it- it's a small town. We all gossip. We know everything, whether it's true or not. But if you have a problem or, for instance, I was 20 [pauses], 25, 26, my first husband was in a drowning accident

and I mean the community just was wonderful. They came out, they were supportive, you have your close friends so. I- I will never forget that, how supportive your friends are. Of course, you live here all your life, have deep connections.

Arnold: Are you hopeful for the future of Crisfield in any area, whether it be economically or flooding, whatever it may be?

Laird: Sadly no. Because I've seen a change when I worked at long-term recovery. That was like, I've been here almost 10 years. So 10 years, I used to work right down on Main Street. Thought it was bad then, but it was still better than what it is now. It's in 10 years it even got worse. And the stores, I mean you used to have a little antique store. Just, it's just- just, no. Right now, no. I- I do think the mayor is trying her hardest to bring something into town.

Arnold: What role do you think tourism plays for the city of Crisfield?

Laird: I think they try to use it, but I, what is here? What's here when you come to Crisfield? We don't have a beach. We don't- we don't even have good restaurants anymore. I don't know if anybody's told you about years ago, they had a- it was called Side Street. People from everywhere came there. I mean, you had to have a reservation to get there on a summer weekend. And people would line up at the door and they had steamed crabs and corn and it was just, you sat on picnic tables and it went, it was, it was always busy. They, it's just gone, it's gone. I think the Smith Island tour boat's brought a lot of people in. I think that's even dying out. I don't know, I just think it is.

Galladay: How do you think the, or like a, what is the- the mayor doing to improve the- or trying to improve, the city's fortunes?

Laird: I think she's trying to encourage like, TidalHealth to try to come back here and open a facility on Main Street, I heard. [pauses] Of course, this is what I don't understand, you have a facility already here. It's never really flooded. Yes, it's on the water, and the road to it will get flooded. But you're going to build it on a new facility on Main Street where it floods? I- I- that kind of contradicts itself. I don't think it's going to happen, but stranger things. I think she would like to see that to come, but if it does, I think it would be fantastic. But I believe it when I see it, you know. It's just, I don't think it's gonna come.

Arnold: I've heard from other interviewees that there may be some projects or funding in the works for businesses that are- that are looking to open or looking to improve. Do you think if they're given that opportunity and they end up being successful and tourism is on the rise, that it could improve funding for other things in the- in the city?

Laird: In a perfect world, but I just don't see it happening, I know, you know. That's nothing to do with flooding, but you can't beat the prices at Walmart. The economy is being really a mess

right now. Am I gonna go shopping? No, I'll probably go to, I will drive to Salisbury or Pocomoke and do my, I'll I do grocery shopping at Food Lion, but I do some at Walmart too, I'm not gonna lie to you. I don't, there's nothing in town that I buy, anything except for groceries. Maybe something at the Family Dollar, I mean I don't, very few things, there is nothing to buy besides some household supplies from Family Dollar. I don't go there. And Amazon. Well, you know, I can pick- pick a shirt and have it here in two days. Is that because of flooding? No, but it's just, yeah. They got to think of something to bring- bring down here. And then I heard there was talk about convention center. I know one time the Lutherans were thinking about coming here and building a convention center because they're really big and like in the wintertime meeting and- and doing whatever Lutherans do. But, and then in the summertime, they could use it as a motel, hotel conference center. But it's, maybe, maybe, but then everybody wants part of the pie, and then there's struggle there so.

Galladay: And so, as we're- as we're- as we're starting to wrap up, is there anything that you want to say about Crisfield that we haven't gone over? Something that you really want people in the future to know. What- what might that be?

Laird: I mean, I don't know. I really would like to see it come back, but I haven't seen it even turn a little bit yet from what it used to be. I mean, we used to have two big grocery stores. Like I said, I remember the movie theater. There used to be more than that. I don't remember the Bowling Alley. We had dry cleaners; it was just small-town America. Just like "The Andy Griffith Show," you know, everybody knew each other and you walk across the street. Everybody knew the mailman. Everybody knew the grocery person, but it's not like that anymore. I don't even know half the people in town, to be honest with you. I mean, I knew all the kids when my kids were growing up, but I don't even, you knew the names? I don't know these people. I have no idea who they are.

Arnold: And then last question, do you have any wisdom that you would share with future generations, whether it be people in Crisfield or outside of Crisfield, it doesn't matter, just generally.

Laird: Just probably the same one to your parents, go get your college education. That way you have something to fall back on. Make sure you- they can't take that away from you. Marry rich women, marry rich man.

Galladay: Alright well. Unless you have anything else?

Arnold: No, I think that was it. I think we covered everything.

Galladay: Alright. Well, thank you very much.

Laird: Alright, that was easy.

Galladay: We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today.

[Transcript ends]